*Evidentialism & Social Epistemology*

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1. *Introduction*

Traditionally, epistemology has been individualistic. Evidentialism fits squarely in this individualistic tradition. According to evidentialism, it is the mental states of the subject alone that fully determine what she is justified in believing. More recently, epistemology has become more and more social, moving away from this individualistic paradigm. Social epistemology examines the social nature of knowledge and rationality and thus engages in projects that are a departure from more traditional epistemology. It might be thought that social epistemology has no room for the evidentialist. In this paper, I argue that one can be an evidentialist as well as a thoroughgoing social epistemologist. In section 1, I explain individualistic epistemology and evidentialism. In section 2, I highlight some of the central projects of social epistemology. In section 3, I argue that none of the projects in section 2 are in conflict with evidentialism and that many can be fruitfully pursued from within an evidentialist framework. In sections 4 – 7, I examine and respond to two challenges to a successful evidentialist social epistemology. The first, inspired by Goldberg (2010), claims that evidentialism is ill-equipped to handle the insights regarding the epistemic importance of what is happening in the minds of others. The second, inspired by Lackey (2018), claims that evidentialism is unable to address a form of epistemic injustice. I show that both challenges can be met by the evidentialist.

1. *Evidentialism & Individualistic Epistemology*

Epistemology has historically been an armchair discipline. There are two features of an armchair discipline. First, armchair disciplines do not rely on the insights from empirical fields. They see empirical information as having little to no relevance to their discipline. Second, armchair disciplines tend to be individualistic. They are often not in the business of group work. In principle, all the work in an armchair discipline can be done by a single subject (sitting in an armchair). Descartes’ epistemological project is a paradigm example. In providing a rational foundation of his existence, Descartes does not rely on any empirical insights, nor does his project require any kind of collaboration with others. Descartes’ mind provides him with all the resources he needs.

Evidentialism is an epistemological theory that fits squarely within this tradition of individualistic epistemology. Evidentialism is a theory of epistemic justification. At the heart of evidentialism is the following principle:

ES The epistemic justification of anyone’s doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that person has at that time. (Conee & Feldman 2004a, 101)

Thus, evidentialism is a supervenience thesis. No two subjects can be identical evidentially yet differ with regards to their epistemic justification. Evidentially alike beings are justificationally alike beings. For the evidentialist, epistemic justification depends on an *individual’s* total body of evidence. Justification is a matter of what evidence an individual has at a time.

The individualism of evidentialism becomes even more stark once we examine how evidentialists think of evidence. While more common uses of ‘evidence’ include publicly available information, the evidentialist understands evidence possession much more stringently. For instance, Conee and Feldman defend mentalist evidentialism.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to mentalist evidentialism, one’s evidence at a time consists entirely of one’s mental states at that time. This is brought out in the endorsement of the following two related theses[[2]](#footnote-2):

S The justificatory status of a person’s doxastic attitudes strongly supervenes on the person’s occurrent and dispositional mental states, events, and conditions. (Feldman and Conee 2001, 2)

M If any two possible individuals are exactly alike mentally, then they are exactly alike justificationally, e.g., the same beliefs are justified for them to the same extent. (Feldman and Conee 2001, 2)

What S and M make clear, is that one’s evidence is entirely composed of one’s mental states. This prevents any more ‘public’ evidence as being relevant to what an individual is justified in believing. The supervenience base for justificatory properties is entirely internal to the individual subject’s mind. According to evidentialism, external factors such as the reliability of some cognitive mechanism, environmental conditions, or socially possessed evidence are irrelevant to whether, and to what degree, an individual is justified in believing a proposition.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Evidentialism is solely a theory of epistemic justification. The kind of justification that evidentialism concerns is the kind of justification that is a necessary condition for knowledge. So, evidentialist friendly accounts of knowledge will utilize an evidentialist understanding of the justification condition for knowledge, but there is no single evidentialist account of knowledge. Evidentialists can supplement the justification condition in different ways (particularly in response to the Gettier problem)[[4]](#footnote-4).

The individualistic nature of evidentialism might be thought to hinder the evidentialist’s ability to be a proper social epistemologist. After all, if epistemic justification is entirely a matter of what is happening in my mind right now, there does not appear to be much of a role for my broader social context to play. In fact, social epistemology grew, in large part, out of externalist epistemologies which were themselves already a departure from (mentalist) evidentialism.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to externalism about epistemic justification, properties that are external to the subject’s mind are relevant to whether her beliefs are justified. The paradigm example of such an external factor is the reliability of the relevant belief forming process. The reliability of a belief-forming process is a property of the world, and what else is going on out there in the world, and so not a mental feature of the subject. So, externalist theories of epistemic justification depart from evidentialism by including external features of the world as relevant to epistemic justification. Social epistemology emphasizes the epistemological relevance of our social structures and institutions, so it naturally builds upon externalist epistemologies. Since epistemic externalism is already a departure from mentalist evidentialism, social epistemology appears to be yet a further step removed from evidentialism. Given this, it might be hard to see how the projects of social epistemology can be fruitfully pursued by an evidentialist. To meet this challenge, we turn now to examining some of the central projects of social epistemology.

1. *Social Epistemology*

Social epistemology is both broad and diverse. This breadth and diversity make it difficult to say anything informative about the entire field of social epistemology beyond that it investigates the social dimensions of knowledge and rationality. Before turning to some of the central projects in social epistemology, it is worth noting how this general depiction of the field already stands in stark contrast to individualistic epistemology. Social epistemology is far from an armchair discipline. It looks to implement insights from empirical fields and its projects are bothcollaborative and interdisciplinary. These features of social epistemology can be highlighted by briefly touching on some key projects in social epistemology. Following Goldman (2010/11) we can delineate three main branches of social epistemology: individual doxastic agent social epistemology, collective doxastic agent social epistemology, and systems-oriented social epistemology. It will be worth briefly describing each branch of the social epistemology tree.

Individual doxastic agent social epistemology is concerned with epistemic assessments of individuals in cases where ‘social evidence’ is involved. For Goldman and Blanchard (2018), ‘social evidence’ denotes evidence “concerning the utterances, messages, deeds, or thoughts of other people.” So, questions in this branch of social epistemology seems to naturally fit within the more traditional conception of epistemology.[[6]](#footnote-6) The epistemology of testimony is of central concern here. Relevant questions include the following:

* Under what conditions is a belief formed on the basis of someone else’s say-so justified?
* Under what conditions is it known?

In addition, this branch of social epistemology concerns questions of expertise and questions about how to appropriately weigh the testimony of others.[[7]](#footnote-7) Here there are issues about whether and how one can justifiably believe a proposition in the face of disagreement[[8]](#footnote-8) as well as concerns about credibility deficits (and excesses) and the phenomenon of epistemic injustice[[9]](#footnote-9).

Collective doxastic agent social epistemology expands on traditional epistemology by being concerned with epistemic assessments of group agents. It is concerned with whether and how collectives can have beliefs, as well as whether and how those beliefs are justified and become items of knowledge.[[10]](#footnote-10) So, many of the traditional epistemological questions are asked within this branch of social epistemology, but with a shift in subject from the individual to a group agent.

Systems-oriented social epistemology is another branch of social epistemology which departs from the more traditional epistemological program. In this branch, institutional arrangements and systems are assessed for their epistemic consequences. Here, the focus is on the role that our institutions and social practices play in the acquisition, retention, and distribution of knowledge (and justified belief). Institutions can do better or worse in these regards, and this branch of social epistemology investigates which arrangements are the most epistemically advantageous. This branch of social epistemology concerns issues with legal and scientific practice, as well as issues concerning the internet and the phenomenon of fake news.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. *Evidentialist Social Epistemology*

In this section, I will show how the evidentialist can meaningfully engage in each branch of social epistemology. In doing so, I will defend the following two theses:

*The No Conflict Thesis*: None of the broad projects of social epistemology conflict with evidentialism.

*The Fruitfulness Thesis*: Evidentialism can be used to fruitfully inform our inquiry in the broad projects of social epistemology.

According to the *No Conflict Thesis*, there is nothing inconsistent in endorsing evidentialism and engaging in the broad projects of social epistemology outlined above. According to this thesis one needn’t check their evidentialism at the door in order to pursue a social epistemology. *The Fruitfulness Thesis* is stronger. According to it, evidentialism can meaningfully be used to guide and inform the broad projects of social epistemology. So, *the No Conflict Thesis* is a negative thesis (we lack a problem here), and *the Fruitfulness Thesis* is positive (there are positive reasons for the evidentialist to engage).

The compatibility between evidentialism and individual doxastic agent social epistemology appears to be pretty straight-forward.[[12]](#footnote-12) Since this branch of social epistemology is concerned with the traditional questions of epistemology, evidentialists are already partaking in these debates, at least those that concern epistemic justification. Social evidence is a species of evidence more broadly, so of course the evidentialist will be interested in how we should appreciate social evidence. Since social evidence is still evidence that the individual subject possesses (it is just evidence *about* other people), the evidentialist has no problem having such evidence affect what individuals are justified in believing. Further, evidentialists are not overly limited in their options regarding how to think about social evidence. They can use insights about the nature and value of social evidence to fruitfully inform their projects. Take the issue of peer disagreement as an example. Here the question is how discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with you affects the justification of your belief. When you get evidence of a disagreeing peer, you get a piece of social evidence. So, questions about what you should do with this piece of evidence fall squarely in individual doxastic agent social epistemology. Evidentialists, though, are not tied to any particular answer here regarding how weighty this piece of evidence is, or how it interacts with other pieces of evidence you have. In fact, each of the main contender views in this literature (Equal Weight View, Total Evidence View, Justificationist View, and the Right Reasons View) can be adopted and defended by an evidentialist. Which view of disagreement one adopts and defends will depend upon how one views evidential relationships, in particular how higher-order evidence and first-order evidence interact. Inspired by the desire to determine the relation between first-order evidence and higher-order evidence, evidentialists have reason to investigate the central questions in literature on the epistemic significance of disagreement even though different answers to these questions can all fit under the evidentialist umbrella.[[13]](#footnote-13) So, the projects of individual doxastic agent social epistemology can be fruitfully informed by evidentialism.

The shift from individual doxastic agents to collective doxastic agents does not introduce a conflict either. Evidentialism is a thesis about an individual’s epistemic justification, it is silent as to whether collective doxastic agents exist and, if so, how their doxastic attitudes are justified. So, there is no conflict between endorsing evidentialism and pursuing the projects of collective doxastic agent social epistemology since the former is silent regarding the later. That said, evidentialism can nevertheless be used to fruitfully inform the projects of collective doxastic agent social epistemology. An evidentialist who engages in this branch of social epistemology will likely maintain that collective agent doxastic attitudes are justified in virtue of the evidence possessed by that collective agent at that time.[[14]](#footnote-14) Such an evidentialist will be concerned with discovering how collective agents come to possess evidence, how the evidence possessed by the members of the collective relates to the evidence possessed by the collective itself, as well as how collectives base their beliefs on their evidence.[[15]](#footnote-15) So, the evidentialist concerned with the epistemology of groups has a number of questions to pursue even if such a project goes beyond the confines of evidentialism proper. Concerns about an individual’s evidence can naturally translate to questions about a group’s evidence. So, not only is there no conflict between endorsing evidentialism and pursuing the projects of collective doxastic agent social epistemology, the evidentialist social epistemologist has good reason to be concerned to address a number of questions regarding groups and evidence.

Finally, the expansive nature of systems-oriented epistemology renders it compatible with evidentialism. Since the projects of this branch of social epistemology also go beyond the projects of traditional evidentialism, there is no incompatibility between endorsing evidentialism and pursuing these projects of social epistemology. The evidentialist will be committed to certain verdicts regarding when institutions and social arrangements produce, retain, and distribute justified beliefs in virtue of being committed to an account of justification, but evidentialism does not assess these institutions and arrangements themselves. Nevertheless, the evidentialist should welcome inquiry regarding how to improve these institutions in terms of their epistemological effectiveness. Since justification is a necessary condition for knowledge, the evidentialist will maintain that the effectiveness of institutions in producing, retaining, and distributing knowledge will depend (in part) on their effectiveness in acquiring, retaining, and distributing evidence. While such investigations lie outside the domain of traditional evidentialism, they lie outside of traditional epistemology more generally. Just as epistemology has evolved to include such important social questions, so too the evidentialists’ projects can expand to accommodate these questions as well. These social questions are ones that the evidentialist should be concerned to answer.[[16]](#footnote-16) Further, evidentialism can be used to fruitfully engage these projects. The evidentialists concern for evidence acquisition, retention, and distribution will guide her assessment of our epistemological institutions. Evidentialists should care about how social structures and institutions affect the acquisition, retention, and distribution of evidence, as well as how improvements can be made. So, the evidentialist can meaningfully pursue the projects of systems-oriented epistemology as an evidentialist.[[17]](#footnote-17)

1. *Goldberg’s Challenge*

Goldberg raises a challenge to the account given above. Goldberg’s challenge is directed at individualistic reliabilism, but his worries carry over to evidentialism as well. If traditional externalist reliabilism is still not *externalist enough* to capture the insights of social epistemology, it looks like evidentialism is in even deeper trouble.

Goldberg (2012) argues that most versions of reliabilism are unable to capture the social dimensions of knowledge and justification since they are too individualistic.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to traditional reliabilism, it is only the psychological processes *of the subject* whose reliability is relevant for epistemic justification. Goldberg argues that testimonial knowledge and (doxastic) justification present problems for such individualistic accounts. By looking at special cases of testimony, we can see that the reliability of cognitive processes in *the testifier’s mind* are also relevant to whether certain epistemological properties obtain for the hearer. This is most easily seen regarding testimonial knowledge.

Consider the following two cases from Goldberg (2012):

*GOOD*

Wilma has known Fred for a long time; she knows that he is a highly reliable speaker. So when Fred tells her that Barney has been at the stonecutters’ conference all day, Wilma believes him. (Fred appeared to her as sincere and competent as he normally does, and she found nothing remiss with the testimony.) In point of fact, Fred spoke from knowledge. (14)

*BAD*

Wilma has known Fred for a long time; she knows that he is a highly reliable speaker. So when Fred tells her that Barney has been at the stonecutters’ conference all day, Wilma believes him. (Fred appeared to her as sincere and competent as he normally does, and she found nothing remiss with the testimony.) However, in this case, Fred did not speak from knowledge. Instead, he as just making up a story about Barney, having had ulterior motives in getting Wilma to believe the story…As luck would have it, Barney was in fact at the conference all day (thought Fred, of course, did not know this). (15)

In these twin testimonial cases, what occurs *in the hearers’ minds* is identical, but there are important differences *in the speakers’ minds*. In GOOD, the Fred speaks from knowledge, whereas in BAD he only accidentally tells the truth. The knowledge differences between the two cases don’t stop with Fred either. In GOOD, plausibly Wilma comes to know that Barney was at the stonecutters’ conference, whereas in BAD she does not. So, there is also a knowledge difference in the hearers in GOOD and BAD despite the mental alikeness of Wilma in both cases.

These verdicts might seem easy enough to capture, since the features of BAD do not seem too unlike those that obtain in familiar Gettier cases. In familiar Gettier cases, a justified true belief fails to be an item of knowledge due to some hard to pin down factor which makes the truth of the belief too accidental. That said, Goldberg argues that a better explanation of these verdicts in GOOD and BAD is given by a more radical social reliabilism. According to Goldberg’s social reliabilism, testimonial beliefs, like inferential beliefs, are the product of belief-dependent processes.[[19]](#footnote-19) So understood, in cases of testimonial belief, the input is the testimony of the speaker (not strictly speaking their belief), but for the testimony to result in a reliably formed belief in the hearer, this input must itself have been reliably formed. Since the reliability of the testimony will depend upon features *in the speaker’s mind*, the justification of the hearer’s belief will depend upon the reliability of processes *outside of her mind*. Goldberg motivates this account by appealing to an analogy with memorial beliefs. On the standard reliabilist picture, the justification of a memorial belief is *temporally extended*, relying on whether the memorial input was itself reliably formed. Similarly, then, the reliabilist can (and should, according to Goldberg) think of testimonial beliefs being *spatially extended,* relying on whether the testimony was reliable.

On this explanation, Wilma fails to know about Barney’s whereabout in BAD because she fails to have a justified belief. Since her belief about Barney’s whereabouts is not reliably formed (due to the cognitive processes in Fred’s head), her belief is not justified, and therefore also not an item of knowledge. Goldberg claims that this anti-individualistic picture better captures how we rely on others in forming testimonial beliefs than its individualistic rival. This is because its explanation of the verdicts in GOOD and BAD is superior to the proposal that Wilma fails to know in BAD in virtue of not meeting the Gettier condition[[20]](#footnote-20) in BAD.

Why might this be so? Goldberg argues that postulating a Gettier condition failure is both unnecessary and fails to be independently motivated. It is unnecessary, since the reliabilist can instead make the social move that Goldberg recommends. It is unmotivated, since, according to Goldberg, such a failure to meet the Gettier condition would be quite unlike the more familiar Gettier-failures. Since the input belief is not itself Gettiered, Goldberg claims that one would have to maintain that the very process of forming such a belief in that way introduced such a failure. Goldberg sees no reason to think that this occurs in this case and finds that possibility highly unlikely.[[21]](#footnote-21)

An additional asset of this social view is that it captures the way in which we rely on others in receiving their testimony. Many have emphasized the interpersonal reliance on testimony[[22]](#footnote-22), and Goldberg’s social reliabilism captures this. In order for the hearer to receive the epistemic goodies in testimony, those epistemic goodies must be possessed by the speaker. So, in accepting the speaker’s testimony, the hearer is relying on the testimony and cognitive processes in the speaker’s mind.

So, according to Goldberg, any successful reliabilist social epistemology (i.e. one that gets cases of testimonial knowledge correct) must move beyond individualistic reliabilism. To provide a successful social epistemology, the reliabilist must move beyond an examination of the belief-forming processes *in the subject’s mind*, to include the belief-forming processes that the subject is relying on in receiving testimony – processes *in the testifier’s mind*. While Goldberg’s target is individualistic reliabilism, the challenge equally applies to (individualistic) evidentialism. After all, both evidentialism and individualistic reliabilism are committed to viewing only what is happening in the subject’s mind as relevant for whether their belief is justified.

1. *An Evidentialist Response*

In what follows, I want to show how an evidentialist can both capture the desired verdicts in GOOD and BAD, while at the same time emphasizing how we rely on others in our epistemological projects. If successful, this will address Goldberg’s challenge and vindicate an evidentialist social epistemology.

First, how can an evidentialist capture the verdicts in GOOD and BAD? I take the central verdicts that a successful epistemology must garner to be that Wilma *knows* in GOOD and *fails to know* in BAD. Goldberg’s claim that Wilma *justifiably believes* in GOOD and *fails to justifiably believe* in BAD are derivative verdicts, since for Goldberg these additional verdicts simply present the best way to capture the more central knowledge verdicts in these cases. Recall that this argument to the best explanation was motivated by the idea that categorizing BAD as a Gettier case was both unnecessary and unmotivated. So, whether Goldberg’s social reliabilism is the way to go depends upon what motivation there can be had for the rival Gettier-failure explanation. Goldberg can’t see how standard Gettier stories can apply in BAD, but this is due to the fact that he is (explicitly) restricting himself to the assumption of reliabilism about justification throughout his argument. Evidentialist epistemologies can quite naturally categorize BAD as a Gettier case.

For instance, consider the evidentialist account of knowledge proposed by Feit and Cullison (2011), which is inspired by Feldman (2003):

*No Essential Falsehood-Justifying Grounds*: S knows p if and only if (i)

S believes p, (ii) p is true, (iii) S is justified in believing p, and (iv) no

ground that is essential to S’s justification for p justifies S in believing a

falsehood. (291)

This account is evidentialist friendly, since condition (iii) is to be understood along evidentialist lines; to be justified in believing p, believing p must fit S’s total evidence. According to Feit and Cullison, the Gettier condition (what else it takes to turn a justified true belief into knowledge) is that none of the subject’s essential grounds for her belief also justify her in believing something that is false. Feit and Cullison unpack an essential ground as follows:

Ground g is essential to S’s justification for p = df.

(a) g at least partly justifies S in believing p, (b) no part of S’s evidence

that is independent of g fully justifies S in believing p, and (c) g does not

entail two or more independent pieces of evidence such that each one

fully justifies S in believing p. (288)

Some of the details and complications regarding an essential ground needn’t concern us here. All that is important to our task is to note how such an evidentialist friendly account of knowledge can naturally classify BAD as a Gettier case, or at least a case of knowledge failure despite the subject having a justified true belief. It seems pretty straightforward that Wilma is relying on a false essential ground in her testimonial belief regarding Barney’s whereabouts in BAD. In the case, Goldberg notes that Fred seemed sincere and competent in his testimony to Wilma. This, coupled with her background knowledge about Fred, justifies Wilma in believing that Fred is both sincere and competent in his testimony about Barney’s whereabouts. While it is the case that Fred is sincere and competent in GOOD, this is not the case in BAD. So, in BAD, Wilma’s evidence justifies her in believing a falsehood. Further, this falsehood-justifying evidence is essential to her justification for her belief about Barney’s whereabouts. If Wilma is not justified in believing that Fred is sincere and competent in his testimony, then her testimonial belief (if formed) is not justified. So, in BAD, Wilma has an essential falsehood-justifying ground for her belief. For this reason, she fails to know in BAD. Further, this is *the very same condition*, that needs to be met to turn a justified true belief into knowledge. There is no shift in applying the Gettier condition in this particular case from how it is applied in other cases.[[23]](#footnote-23) After all, the condition was motivated and developed by Feit and Cullison independent of concerns about this case.[[24]](#footnote-24),[[25]](#footnote-25)

While evidentialism can capture the desired verdicts in our cases, does it do so at the cost of being unable to account for our epistemic reliance on others? If evidentialism can get the verdicts in GOOD and BAD correctly, but fail to present an account of our reliance on others, plausibly it would still fail to be a suitable social epistemology. Fortunately, this evidentialist account *can* still account for our epistemic reliance on others.

While the evidentialist will not want to appeal to *the reliability of the cognitive processes in a testifier’s mind*, in receiving testimony the hearer is relying on *evidence in the speaker’s mind*. In testimonial exchanges, the speaker cannot simply give the hearer their evidence. The speaker cannot pass along their experiences, memories, or beliefs. However, in their testifying that p, they provide the hearer with higher-order evidence for *p*. Higher-order evidence for a proposition is evidence about the nature or value of the evidence for that proposition. Higher-order evidence contrasts with first-order evidence, which is evidence directly pertaining to the target proposition.[[26]](#footnote-26) In relying on the speaker’s testimony that *p*, the hearer is given higher-order evidence that in some sense acts as a place-holder for the speaker’s own first-order evidence on the matter, it is evidence of evidence.[[27]](#footnote-27) In taking the speaker’s word, the hearer is relying on the speaker’s evaluation of their own evidence. In particular, she is relying on the speaker having evidence relevant to *p*, relying on her having correctly evaluated that evidence to support *p*, and relying on her testifying from that evaluation of her evidence. While this is a fully evidentialist account, it does parallel Goldberg’s social reliabilism. In both cases there is an essential reliance on the speaker in receiving her testimony. For the reliabilist, the reliance is on the belief-forming processes of the speaker, for the evidentialist, the reliance is on the speaker’s evidence.[[28]](#footnote-28)

An additional issue is whether there are reasons to prefer a social evidentialism to a social reliabilism. While this is not the central aim of this paper, and the evidentialism vs. reliabilism debate is too storied to recount here, I will give one reason why social evidentialism might be preferable to social reliabilism. A pressing objection to Goldberg’s social reliabilism, one that does not apply to social evidentialism, is *the indistinguishability objection*. In brief, the problem is that Goldberg’s social reliabilism has it that subjects that are in introspectively indistinguishable states, can differ with respect to their justified beliefs (not just their knowledge). Wilma has no way of telling whether she is in GOOD or BAD, yet, according to Goldberg’s social reliabilism, whether her Barney belief is justified will depend upon whether she is in GOOD or Bad – a fact inaccessible to her.[[29]](#footnote-29) Such a combination of verdicts is anathema to the mentalist evidentialist.[[30]](#footnote-30) Fortunately, the social evidentialist cleanly avoids this combination of verdicts. Since Wilma has the same evidence regarding Barney’s whereabouts in both GOOD and BAD, and that evidence supports her belief that Barney was at the stonecutter’s conference, her belief is justified in *both* GOOD and BAD. While the entrenched reliabilist may be comfortable with the verdicts of social reliabilism, it does seem to come at a cost. And, given social evidentialism, the cost is unnecessary.

1. *Lackey’s Challenge*

A second challenge to an evidentialist social epistemology comes from Jennifer Lackey. Lackey (2018) argues that standard evidentialist norms of credibility assessments are incapable of addressing certain kinds of testimonial injustice. If the evidentialist is unable to address forms of testimonial injustice, then she cannot offer a plausible social epistemology. So, the evidentialist must do something here to account for the failure of the standard evidentialist norms.

Let’s examine the charge. Following Miranda Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice occurs when one is harmed in their capacity as a knower. Testimonial injustice is a species of epistemic injustice that occurs toward a speaker when they are given a credibility deficit owing to an identity prejudice in the hearer (as opposed to an innocent error). It is an epistemic injustice since the speaker is not given what they deserve (epistemically speaking), and is thus harmed in their capacity as a given of knowledge. So, testimonial justice requires individuals to not be prejudicially shortchanged regarding their credibility. This raises the following question: what norm governs our assessments of credibility? Lackey’s target is a standard evidentialist norm according to which the credibility that the hearer affords a speaker must match the hearer’s evidence that the speaker is offering the truth, a norm endorsed (and taken to be obvious) by Fricker[[31]](#footnote-31). Lackey puts the norm as follows:

EN1: For every speaker, S, and hearer, H, if H makes a credibility assessment of S, then H should match it to the evidence that S is offering the truth, and believe, disbelieve, or withhold accordingly. (151)

Lackey raises a series of challenges to this evidentialist norm. First, if a hearer gives a speaker the evidentially appropriate amount of credibility, but also gives a *credibility excess* to themselves (or to other speakers), the original speaker has still been wronged, and wronged as a knower. Credibility assessments are inherently comparative; they do not happen in isolation.[[32]](#footnote-32) So, even if an individual speaker is, *in some sense*, given the credibility that they deserve, if other parties are each given credibility excesses, the contrastive harm is still done.[[33]](#footnote-33) Proportionality is important for credibility assessments, and EN1 fails to capture this. Second, such a norm fails to note how an instance of epistemic injustice toward a single speaker can have a negative effect on other members of the conversation or the community more broadly (particularly members of the same identity group as the speaker). EN1 also fails to capture this broader harm that can occur by focusing solely on the speaker.

While these flaws in EN1 can be addressed by the evidentialist, another of Lackey’s challenges is directly targeted at the evidentialist nature of EN1. Both problems above involved the hearer failing to match *some* credibility assessment (whether the speaker’s or someone else’s) with the evidence they possessed. So, the evidentialist has an easy explanation for what went wrong in such cases – they represent a failure to respond correctly to the subject’s own evidence. In failing to match the credibility afforded to a speaker with the subject’s evidence about their credibility, the hearer harms the speaker by not granting them their due as a potential informant. However, Lackey argues that testimonial injustice can also occur when the hearer *correctly* attributes credibility (to all relevant parties) in accordance to the evidence they possess. According to Lackey, this occurs when there is additional unpossessed evidence that the hearer *should have had*, which if they did possess would have called for different attributions of credibility. As Lackey correctly notes,

some of the greatest epistemic and moral failings come about from beliefs formed on the basis of insufficient evidence, where such a basis is the result of colossal irresponsibility. Racists, sexists, and bigots often believe in accordance with the evidence that they have in their possession precisely because they surround themselves with likeminded people and news sources that support everything they already want to believe. This limiting of the available evidence has the result that important considerations that challenge or undermine one’s beliefs are deliberately excluded from one’s evidential base. Surely, however, one’s beliefs are not justified via this intentional ignorance, and the reason for this is that we are evaluated—epistemically and morally—in terms of evidence both that we do, and that we should, have. (161)

Lackey call this kind of epistemic injustice “normative testimonial injustice” since it is related to her account of normative defeaters. A normative defeater is a belief or doubt that the subject *should have* that undermines the justification of the subject’s target belief.[[34]](#footnote-34) So, normative testimonial injustice occurs when credibility is improperly assigned due to evidence that the subject should (but doesn’t) have, and the subject lacks this evidence due to a prejudice on their part. Since normative testimonial injustice essentially involves evidence that the subject does not possess, the evidentialist, who is solely concerned with the evidence that is possessed by the subject at the time, seems incapable of addressing this kind of epistemic injustice. While Lackey’s direct target is the particular evidential norm EN1, her argument can be taken more broadly as a challenge to evidentialism itself and its ability to be a part of a successful social epistemology. If evidentialist norms cannot address, *and even promote*, epistemic injustice, then evidentialism is unsuitable as a social epistemology.

1. *An Evidentialist Response*

Opponents of evidentialism have often pushed on the relevance of unpossessed evidence.[[35]](#footnote-35) Evidentialist responses have often distinguished between two kinds of cases: cases of intentionally ignored evidence and cases of unintentionally ignored evidence. What evidentialists claim about a case of unpossessed evidence depends upon which of two categories it falls under.[[36]](#footnote-36) In cases where the subject fails to have some evidence because they have intentionally avoided that evidence, the evidentialist can claim that one’s evidence (and what it supports) is not so easily manipulated. For instance, Kornblith (1983) describes a case of an ego-driven young physicist who ignores a senior colleague’s criticisms and so fails to acquire significant evidence against his theory. While the young physicist avoids getting the first-order evidence that motivates his colleague’s criticisms, he does not fail to acquire higher-order evidence against his view. In simply being aware that his colleague has criticisms, the young physicist gets evidence that there is evidence against his view (evidence possessed by his colleague). This higher-order evidence can be quite impactful and dramatically change what the young physicist’s total body of evidence supports. The moral here generalizes. In cases where a subject is intentionally avoiding acquiring some evidence, they can only do so with the knowledge (or justified belief) that such evidence exists. But the knowledge (or justified belief) that such evidence exists is itself higher-order evidence, and this higher-order evidence will affect what the subject’s total body of evidence supports. In Lackey’s case above, the imagined racists, sexists, and bigots all seem to fall into this camp. They are intentionally controlling their evidential base in an attempt to control what they are justified in believing about members of some identity group.[[37]](#footnote-37) The evidentialist can maintain that such efforts are bound to fail due to the nature and value of higher-order evidence. The higher-order evidence the subject possesses in virtue of knowing (or being justified in believing) about the existence of the evidence they are avoiding, prevents their credibility assessment from fitting their total evidence. So, a case of normative testimonial injustice that results from an individual *intentionally* ignoring some relevant evidence due to a prejudice can be directly addressed by evidentialism.

That said, not all cases of problematic ignorance are cases where the subject has intentionally avoided some piece of evidence. In some cases, the subject may simply have no idea that there is an important piece of evidence out there that they lack, even if in some sense they should know better. For instance, Baehr (2011) gives an example of an individual, George, who is intellectually lazy and apathetic, and as a result is completely oblivious to the fact that there is overwhelming evidence of the health risks associated with smoking. In fact, George is unaware that there is any such evidence and the total body of evidence he possesses actually supports the belief that there are no negative health effects to smoking. Since he is completely unaware of the existence of such evidence, he also lacks the relevant higher-order evidence (the evidence that such evidence is out there). So, the evidentialist maneuver above cannot work in the case of oblivious George. George’s is a case of *unintentionally* ignored evidence. While the case of George does not involve credibility assessments, it is easy to imagine a parallel case that does. A case where an individual badly misevaluates the credibility of a speaker due to the fact that they lack evidence they should have, is a case of epistemic injustice even when the subject is completely unaware that their evidence base is deficient in this way.[[38]](#footnote-38)

In cases of this type, evidentialists have argued that the subject’s target belief is epistemically justified, since it fits his total evidence, while noting that there are other negative assessments to make of the subject. So, a case of normative testimonial injustice that occurs due to an individual’s unintentionally ignoring some relevant evidence due to a prejudice cannot be directly addressed by evidentialism. The injustice brought about by such an individual is not a direct result of his failing to believe in accordance with his evidence. However, this is not to say that the evidentialist cannot address such cases of epistemic injustice. While the evidentialist cannot *directly* address these cases of epistemic injustice, they can be *indirectly* addressed. The evidentialist is not committed to maintaining that *every* important epistemic assessment depends upon believing in accordance with one’s evidence, just that epistemic justification is like that. So, the evidentialist can endorse the claim that the epistemic irresponsibility exhibited in such cases can lead to epistemic injustice, even without there being a mismatch between the subject’s evidence and their assessments of the credibility of others. Being epistemically irresponsible is not a good way to be, and it is also not simply a matter of failing to respond correctly to one’s evidence. Epistemic irresponsibility is a failure to make the requisite efforts to gather the appropriate evidence in the first place. The evidentialist is not prohibited from acknowledging the existence of epistemic irresponsibility or noting the epistemic harms that can come as a result.[[39]](#footnote-39) Such assessments outstrip the evidentialist assessment, but evidentialism is not a grand unified epistemology. Evidentialism is simply a theory of justification, and one can supplement an endorsement of evidentialism with any number of additional epistemological theses. Lackey’s argument shows that there are important epistemic assessments that go beyond the evidentialist assessment, but these assessments are compatible with evidentialism and thus do not pose a problem for a successful evidentialist social epistemology. In fact, the evidentialist *should* be interested in epistemic assessments just like these since they importantly involve evidence, in particular, what evidence you should have had.[[40]](#footnote-40)

1. *Conclusion*

While the turn to social epistemology has often been taken to have left individualistic epistemologies, like evidentialism, in the past, we have seen that there is room for a fruitful evidentialist social epistemology. None of the branches of social epistemology conflict with evidentialism, and evidentialism can give a meaningful account of our epistemic reliance on others, one that is at least on par with its more familiar reliabilist rival, and has the resources to address epistemic injustice.[[41]](#footnote-41)

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1. In what follows I will be understanding evidentialism as mentalist evidentialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These two principles are related in that M spells out an implication of S. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That said, which mental states an individual is in may depend upon external factors. Evidentialism is compatible with mental content being external. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gettier (1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This follows Goldberg (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. However, we will examine two challenges to this below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Lackey (2008), Moran (2018), and Watson (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Feldman and Warfield (2012), Matheson (2015), and Christensen and Lackey (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Fricker (2007) and Medina (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, see List and Pettit (2011), Brady and Fricker (2016), and Lackey (2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For instance, see Goldman (1999), Anderson (2006), and Rini (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We will see some reason to resist this thought in section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. These questions include the following: does discovering a disagreeing peer always give you a defeater for your belief? When it does, how strong is that defeater? And in what circumstances is that defeater itself defeated. For an exploration of these questions, see Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I don’t think that an evidentialist is committed to thinking that the doxastic attitudes of collective agents are justified in the same way that the doxastic attitudes of individual agents are justified. After all, the ways in which collective agents have beliefs are plausibly quite different that the ways that individual agents have beliefs. Nevertheless, an evidentialist account of the justification of the beliefs of collective agents would fit more cohesively with evidentialism about individual doxastic agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For examples of such projects, see Williamson (2009), List and Pettit (2011), and Carter (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For examples of such projects, see Zollman (2012) and O’Connor and Weatherall (forthcoming), [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In fact, in Feldman and Conee (1985, 31-32) they note the importance of responsible evidence gathering, simply denying that responsibly inquiry is necessary for epistemic justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See also Goldberg’s entry in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Following Goldman (1986) a belief-dependent process is a belief-forming process whose input is a belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. We should take ‘the Gettier condition’ to refer to whatever condition(s) must be added to an account of knowledge (a justified, true, belief account of knowledge, or some other) to take care of Gettier cases – to have it that the subject does not know in such cases. See Gettier (1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In conversation, Goldberg finds further motivation for his view from considering the following:

*IN-BETWEEN*

Wilma has known Fred for a long time; she knows that he is a highly reliable speaker. So when Fred tells her that Barney has been at the stonecutters’ conference all day, Wilma believes him. (Fred appeared to her as sincere and competent as he normally does, and she found nothing remiss with the testimony.) However, in this case, Fred did not speak from knowledge. Rather, he has a justified, true, belief that fails to be knowledge because it fails to meet the Gettier condition.

While Wilma fails to know on the basis of Fred’s testimony in both BAD and IN-BETWEEN, her belief based on testimony looks epistemically better in IN-BETWEEN. Goldberg captures this intuitive verdict since her belief is unjustified in BAD and justified (though not known) in IN-BETWEEN. So, Goldberg’s social reliabilism can capture the epistemic progression from BAD, to IN-BETWEEN, to GOOD by claiming that Wilma goes from failing to be justified, to being justified but Gettiered, to knowing. Goldberg concludes that his social reliabilism is the best account of the verdicts in GOOD and BAD. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Faulkner (2007; 2011), Hinchman (2005), Moran (2006), and Pettit (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For further examples of how this account of knowledge applies to other cases including more familiar Gettier cases, see Feit and Cullison (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. While we have seen how one evidentialist friendly account of knowledge can classify BAD as a case where Wilma fails to meet the Gettier condition, it does not appear to be the only such candidate. No defeater accounts too can render such a verdict. In BAD, the true proposition that Fred is making up a story about Barney’s whereabouts, would be a defeater for Wilma, depriving her of having knowledge about Barney’s whereabouts. Such an account of knowledge is evidentialist friendly since its justification condition can be met by evidentialist justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. What about Goldberg’s claim that social reliabilism can better account for why IN-BETWEEN is epistemically better for Wilma than BAD? While the evidentialist solution given above cannot account for this difference by claiming that IN-BETWEEN is simply a Gettier-failure whereas BAD is not, a response remains. While the evidentialist response I’ve given will classify both IN-BETWEEN and BAD as Gettier-failures, all Gettier-failures need not be equally epistemically bad. Two accidentally true beliefs can nevertheless differ in *how* accidentally true they are, and this can make the more accidental belief epistemically worse in some sense, even if both beliefs are alike in terms of justification and in failing to meet the Gettier condition. While we may not have an established term for such an epistemic difference, it seems plausible that such a difference exists. Another place where we might see such a difference is between standard Gettier cases and ‘doubly’-Gettier cases that include additional justifying falsehoods. This difference parallels the difference between BAD and IN-BETWEEN. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This follows Kelly (2010) and Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For more on the connection between higher-order evidence and testimony, see Rowley (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Goldberg (2010) extends his account of epistemic reliance beyond cases of testimony. He argues that communities can be coverage-reliable, and so subjects can sometimes be justified in believing a proposition since if that proposition were false, the subject would have heard about it by now. Here too, the evidentialist can offer a parallel account. While the evidentialist account will not rely on reliability features in the subject’s community, parallel moves can be made by referencing the subject’s evidence about her community. When the subject is justified in believing that her community would uncovered the truth of the matter by now, and that sufficient time has passed for this knowledge to have been dispersed, she can justifiably conclude from having not heard a report of that claim, that the claim is not true. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Goldberg responds to the indistinguishability objection in Goldberg (2010, p. 148). However, in tackling the objection Goldberg takes as his opponent someone who is also an externalist about justification. Goldberg’s response to the objection plays on an incoherence for an externalist about justification that takes on a certain pair of views (e.g. that Wilma is more justified in BAD then she would be in an evil demon scenario that is introspectively indistinguishable). The indistinguishability objection is more forcefully made from outside of epistemic externalism (where certain bullets have already been bitten). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This problem is one instantiation of the New Evil Demon Problem. For more on this problem, see Cohen (1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Fricker (2007) p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This also follows Medina (2011). For a challenge to this, see McGlynn’s entry in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For instance, suppose that S has two advisors, A and B. Advisor A has a lot of credentials and gives good advice. S correctly judges how likely A is to be correct on matters and assigns A a fitting degree of credibility. If A was S’s only advisor, then there would not be any credibility problem. However, advisor B has credentials that are equally impressive as A’s and, by S’s lights, B is as likely as A to be correct on a given matter. Nevertheless, S affords B a credibility excess. S gives B more credibility than what fits their likeliness to be correct, and so more that afforded to A. So, in consulting A and B on matters, S consistently takes B’s advice when A and B offer incompatible recommendations. While there is some sense in which S has given A an appropriate level of credibility, it aligns with A’s likeliness to be correct, there is a comparative epistemic wrong that is done to A given the credibility excess given to B. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Lackey (2008) for more on normative defeaters. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Baer (2011), Benton (2016), Goldberg (2016, 2017), Lackey (2008), Kornblith (1983), and Miracchi (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For more on this distinction and how the evidentialist can navigate it, see Matheson (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. While the phrases ‘surrounding themselves’ and ‘deliberately excluded’ imply intention, it is possible that social and psychological mechanism that are under the subject’s radar are at work. Thanks to Aidan McGlynn for pointing this out. We will examine unintended evidence avoidance below. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. A somewhat similar objection is raised by Srinivasan (2020) targeting epistemic internalism where subjects form beliefs in circumstances of ‘bad ideology’. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The same is true of epistemic vices more generally. The evidentialist can note their existence and their harms without the burden of unpacking every epistemic vice in terms of a failure of the subject to respond correctly to their evidence. Some epistemic vices might be like this, but they likely are not. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For an argument along these lines and an example of how an evidentialist can incorporate responsible inquiry into an important epistemic assessment, see Matheson (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Thanks to Sandy Goldberg, Kevin McCain, Aidan McGlynn, participants at the 2019 Southeastern Epistemology Conference, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)